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ABSTRACT

Stretch 107 is a version of English 107 (a first-year composition course for international students at Arizona State University), designed to provide those with low proficiency in English with various strategies for writing acceptable prose in English. Since it is a 2-semester course, Stretch 107 gives students more time to work on their assignments, generate ideas, and think about and revise their writing; also, although the course itself does not concentrate on developing linguistic skills, the extra time makes it possible for students to improve their speaking, listening, reading, and grammar in addition to their writing. Most of the students have never been exposed to English academic prose before; one of the things the course does is explain how academic prose is different from other kinds. Further, these students have minimal knowledge of the writing process; if they have ever been taught how to write it was in a strictly prescribed pattern. The course attempts to correct misconceptions about bad attitudes about writing through discussion of the writing process and through the introduction of writing strategies. Since students spend little time generating ideas before they start writing, they get stuck and find it hard to continue. They correct and recorrect form in an attempt to compensate for lack of content. Stretch 107 helps students to develop and to concentrate on content and to avoid a fixation on form. It also offers emotional support and continuity because it continues over two semesters. (TB)

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# An ESL Instructor's Perspective on the Stretch Program

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Stretch 107 (or WAC 101/ENG 107) is a two-semester version of ENG 107 (a first-year composition course for international students), designed to provide international students with low proficiency in English with various strategies for writing acceptable academic prose in English. Right now we are placing students in Stretch 107 or regular English 107 on the basis of their TOEFL scores. We are aware of the fact that the scores on the TOEFL test do not measure students' writing competence and hope to switch to writing portfolios in the near future, but for now the TOEFL scores are the only way to decide on placement at Arizona State U.

Being a two-semester course, Stretch 107 gives students more time to work on their assignments, generate ideas and think about and revise their writing; also, although the course itself does not concentrate on developing linguistic skills, the extra time makes it possible for students to improve their speaking, listening, reading, and grammar in addition to writing.

The students in our Stretch 107 classes come from all over the world and bring to the composition classroom a wide variety of cultural, educational and linguistic backgrounds as well as very diverse concepts of what writing is. What unites them, however, is the feeling that they can't write well first of all because they have nothing to say but also because despite years of memorizing grammar rules they still can't speak or write correct English. The students' unfamiliarity with the way the American university operates adds to these feelings of inadequacy. These students are, in the words of Mina Shaughnessy, 'outsiders' to the academic community lacking the special kinds of knowledge that the

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'insiders' (their teachers and more experienced students) have. One of our tasks as Stretch 107 instructors is to introduce these students to the conventions and practices of the academic discourse community and help them master these practices in order to be able to function as insiders.

Most of our students have never been exposed to English academic prose before and therefore one of the things we have to do is explain how this kind of prose is different from other kinds of prose that they might be familiar with. We also need to point out to our students the differences between their interlanguage and Standard American English. All of this does not mean, however, that we are trying to convert our students, make them renounce their own cultural and linguistic identity, and make them use our language and write the way we do. The failure to point out the differences between what they know and what the university expects of them would mean betrayal because these students expect us to help them improve their writing as well as their English and ultimately succeed in college.

Our students come to the composition classroom straight from ESL classes in which they have been taught English grammar and have gotten some practice in listening comprehension and conversation, but very little, if any, practice in writing. The most they have written in English are sentences or short paragraphs and most of them haven't had much more practice in writing in their own language either. Therefore, these students find writing extremely difficult and frustrating. They have minimal knowledge of the writing process; if they have ever been taught how to write it was in a strictly prescribed pattern (such as the five paragraph essay or some variant of it) and find it hard to get away from this sort of writing and explore their thoughts and ideas without trying to fit them

into ready-made patterns. One of our most important tasks is to help our students realize that in writing it isn't possible to follow premade patterns, that there isn't one correct answer to the question "How many paragraphs should an essay have?".

As a result of their inexperience with writing as well as the fact that they have received virtually no writing instruction, our students have developed negative attitudes towards writing. They believe that they are 'bad' writers and since they also believe in talent and inspiration, they see their being 'bad' writers as being the result of a lack of inspiration. They believe that those of us who write well just happen to be born with that talent; to the rest writing will always remain a mystery. They don't believe that writing can be learned and consequently have given up long ago any hope of ever being able to write well. They can't imagine themselves as writers writing. The most they hope to get out of an English class is some more correct grammar because they believe that that is the most important component of good writing. Therefore, one of the first things that we need to deal with are our students' misconceptions about writing. From the very beginning of the semester I talk to my students about my development as a writer and point out the fact that I had to learn how to write in English, too. I also emphasize the fact that writing can be taught and learned and encourage them to work hard by saying that if I could do it so can they.

When I ask my students to write in class, most of them fit Mike Rose's description of writer's block. They don't spend any time generating ideas before they start writing and, therefore, when they get stuck, they find it hard to continue. They erase words and even whole sentences time after time trying to come up with the correct from and as a result of that produce very little content.

Also, their essays are usually full of generalizations and clichés because they think that their knowledge on almost any subject is minimal and therefore they should use what other people have said. These students' fears and insecurities as well as their obsession with formal correctness stand in the way of writing.

Therefore, one of our fist tasks as teachers is to help our students realize that they already know a great deal because the realization that they do have something to say is the first step toward more effective writing. The only invention strategy that most of our students have ever used is outlining; therefore, it is not at all surprising that they run into difficulties when trying to generate ideas for writing. They tend to neglect real invention because they remember all too well the times when they were told to outline before writing (because this was supposed to help them write better) yet found the process extremely artificial and preferred to do it only after they had written the paper. I model for and with my students a variety of invention strategies which they can later choose from and use on their own in order to generate ideas on different topics. Since my students are non-native speakers of English, I let them generate ideas in their native language, if they need to, since trying to think in English might cause a cognitive overload and interfere with the invention process.

Besides modeling various invention strategies, I also stress the recursive nature of writing and the fact that invention does not stop when writing starts (which the terms 'prewriting' and 'writing' might imply). The first assignment in my Stretch 107 class helps me drive this point home; the students are asked to write an essay about a significant person, but in their first draft they usually fail to provide the necessary details or demonstrate why this particular person has been significant in their life. Therefore, after we have looked at the first draft, we

do a variety of activities in class that help students generate more ideas and details. After they have tried this and realized that it works, students are eager to do it while working on their other papers too.

In my Stretch 107 classes, I also use journal writing as an invention tool. We all like journal writing and tend to use it a great deal because it provides students with more practice in writing. However, ever since I started using the journal for invention, my students see it as more useful because it helps them explore ideas and generate details that they can include in their papers. I also use journal writing to help students start to share their writing with others without the fear of being judged on the basis of correctness.

Still, it is difficult to make the transition between sharing a journal entry and sharing the draft of a paper with peers. In the beginning, students tend to be suspicious of peer review so we discuss peer review and its purpose as a class, decide on criteria, and talk about the different ways of helping each other without being overly critical and judgmental. As the semester progresses, students become more confident with their knowledge of the writing process; they realize that even though they are not English teachers they are competent readers who can give their peers feedback that will help them revise their papers more successfully. Peer review also helps students get a sense of audience. Most of my students tend to produce writer-based prose; they find it difficult to detach themselves from their own paper and look at it from someone else's perspective. Reading their peers' papers helps them understand better the demands of their audience and how they can accommodate these demands when revising their papers.

Revision is another topic we talk about extensively in class because my students tend to equate revision with editing and, if we fail to discuss revision, they try to fix the grammar in the paper and believe that they revised it. When talking about revision sharing my own writing with students helps me a great deal because they can see that even more experienced writers revise all the time. Students need to see how more experienced writers write, but they also need to see what kinds of changes those writers make during revision in order to meet the demands of their audience.

In the beginning, it is difficult to get students not to concentrate on formal features while they are revising for content, but as the semester progresses they become more able to separate revision from editing and put off editing until later. For non-native speakers editing can be extremely difficult and frustrating because they lack the linguistic competence of native speakers. Therefore, I tend to spend a great amount of time working with students on an individual basis, pointing out the kinds of errors they make, and finding ways to eliminate those errors one at a time. I avoid formal grammar explanations because the majority of students do not understand them anyway and, even if they do, it is questionable whether they can apply them to their own writing.

One of the problems that haunts my students from the moment they start writing is the lack of vocabulary necessary for writing for the university. Even though native speakers very often feel that their vocabulary is inadequate, they have the native speaker linguistic knowledge which enables them to know with a high degree of certainty where and when to use certain words after they have found them. Non-native speakers, on the other hand, very often cannot make the distinction between a noun and a verb, for example, and although interested

readers can understand the meaning of their sentences, research shows that these are the types of errors that native speakers of English find most distracting. Therefore, I try to help my students build up their vocabulary. Of course, this takes time because the best way to improve one's vocabulary is by reading and paying attention to the language and students who are trying to find the appropriate words now might become discouraged.

But even in the face of problems such as this one which might require more time than a two-semester writing class can provide, I encourage my students, inform them of their progress, and focus on their strengths and capabilities first; I try to provide a lot of guidance and positive feedback as well as emotional support. I do this in conferences, working with students on an individual basis, giving them more feedback, clarifying my remarks and suggestions, and concentrating on their individual difficulties. During these conferences I am also able to provide the emotional support that my students need. For my students, the university is an impersonal place in which they are strangers and, therefore, my class is one of the very few safe places where they get together with other students who are facing the same problems. Because of this, my classroom becomes the place where these students learn that they are not inadequate but are simply making the kinds of errors that every beginner makes.

I tend to discuss with my students the cultural, linguistic and rhetorical differences that they are trying to deal with and point out the fact that differences are just that and that they do not imply any kind of a hierarchy between cultures or languages. Since the Stretch classes are relatively small and the students spend two semesters working with the same instructor, they develop a feeling of community; they start to feel more comfortable working with me and with their

peers as the semester progresses and come to see me as somebody who understands the kinds of problems that they are facing. For this group of students this is especially important since they find themselves in a completely new and unfamiliar environment and to feel that they can talk to their instructor and ask for help and advice makes them feel that they have started making their way into the academic community and makes them feel less like strangers and more like people who can negotiate meaning with representatives of different cultures and environments.